R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 013 258 UD 001 384

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED STATUS.

BY- RIESSMAN, FRANK

PUB DATE 24 APR 63

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.44 11P.

DESCRIPTORS- *DISADVANTAGED YOUTH, *URBAN SCHOOLS, *TEACHING TECHNIQUES, *TEACHER ATTITUDES, BEHAVIOR PATTERNS, EDUCATIONAL CHANGE, *LEARNING,

THE RECENT CONCERN FOR THE PROBLEMS OF THE POOR IS BEING REFLECTED IN CHANGES IN EDUCATIONAL THEORY AND PRACTICES. EDUCATORS NOW FEEL THAT THE DISADVANTAGED YOUTH IS EDUCABLE AND THAT IT IS THE SCHOOL'S RESPONSIBILITY TO EDUCATE HIM. THERE IS, HOWEVER, THE DANGER THAT THIS PRESENT CONCERN IS ONLY A "FAD" AND THUS WILL PASS. IN THEIR INCREASED INTEREST IN THE PROBLEMS OF THE DISADVANTAGED, EDUCATORS MUST GUARD AGAINST DIRECTING PARENTS ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION WITHOUT ENCOURAGING RECIPROCAL ADVICE. THERE IS ALSO THE DANGER THAT THIS NEW CONCERN WILL BURDEN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION WITH THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR GUARANTEEING THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD'S ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT. UNFORTUNATELY, IN STRESSING THE WEAKNESSES OF THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD, EDUCATORS DISREGARD THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF HIS LEARNING AND LIFE STYLES. AWARENESS, FOR EXAMPLE, OF THE STRENGTH OF THE CHILD'S CONCRETE AND PHYSICAL LEARNING STYLE CAN HELP THE WELL-TRAINED SLUM TEACHER TO MOTIVATE THE CHILD EVEN BEYOND HIS GRADE LEVEL. CONTRARY TO WHAT MANY TEACHERS BELIEVE THIS LEARNING STYLE DOES NOT PRECLUDE THE CHILD'S ACADEMIC SUCCESS NOR DOES IT REQUIRE HIS BEING TRACKED INTO A VOCATIONAL CURRICULUM. UNDERSTANDINGS OF THIS KIND WILL PERMIT TEACHERS TO MAKE EFFECTIVE USE OF SUCH POTENTIALLY USEFUL TEACHING TECHNIQUES AS ROLE PLAYING. (LB)

ED013258

UD001384

DEAN FISHMAN:

We have a very rich program this afternoon, and I will not rob our speakers of any more time than I already have. They all have been given a very meager allotment of time and I will now proceed to introduce them to you. Our first speaker is Dr. Frank Riessman. His topic, "The Significance of Socially Disadvantaged Status," is one that he is eminently qualified to discuss. His name, his book and his message have become nationally, if not internationally known within the last year or so. However, I happen to know that, as a social psychologist, Dr. Riessman has been consistently interested in lower class culture and in the "positives" that it represents for a goodly number of years, and it is because of that persistent interest on his part, as well as because of his very recent fame in connection with his book on "The Culturally Deprived Child," that I am so happy to present him to you as our first speaker.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED STATUS

DR. FRANK RIESSMAN

MOBILIZATION FOR YOUTH - COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

01384

Thank you very much. It is indeed a pleasure to be here. I think that Project Beacon has certainly taken a leading role in the United States in terms of demonstrating what needs to be done in preparing teachers, guidance workers and others to work with disadvantaged youth. I would like to thank Dean Fishman for his remarks concerning my long term interest in the lower class culture. It is true that I have had this interest - but it is also true that very few know about it.

I would like to describe what I think are the present trends in "the revolution in American education" - i.e., in connection with concern for deprived youngsters. I would also like to point to certain dangers that I think are

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

occurring in connection with this concern. Finally, I'd like to point to just a few new directions that I have noted as I've gone around the country talking to various groups.

In the recent past, we have witnessed a rapidly growing interest in poverty and in the urban poor. Witness five major books on poverty in the last year, fourteen Great Cities Projects concerned with Higher Horizons - like programs and education, vast numbers of "Mobilization for Youth" community projects concerned with increasing opportunities for the urban poor and so on. The central domestic issues at the present time (discrimination, housing, education and mental health), increasingly revolve around the urban poor. What has aroused all this concern? There appear to be at least five major factors, which I am simply going to allude to, propelling the "poverty movement": (1) The powerful challenges being raised by both wings of the Negro movement, the Integrationists and the Black Muslims; (2) The stagnation in economic growth, the increasing unemployment, the prospect of automation, and the increasing failure of military expenditures to buoy up the economy; (3) The continued migration of the poor to the suburbs of segregated cities; (4) The Supreme Court decision regarding district reapportionment, shifting the balance of power to urban dwellers; (5) The considerable interest of the Kennedy administration in one of its main sources of power, namely the urban vote. I think it is very important to see this context for the tremendously growing interest in the urban poor in our society. It is perhaps in the field of education that the greatest upheaval is taking place regarding the urban poor.

After decades of ignoring the problems of the deprived, as reflected in middle class oriented "Dick and Jane" readers, decades in which teachers couldn't wait to leave slum areas, decades in which Parent Teachers Associations

wanted no part of the untutored core; decades in which a school culture that had no place for the mental style of low income people was considered quite appropriate, there has now come to pass a marked shift towards interest in the poor in the education world. New readers are being prepared which take into account a wider range of urban problems and life styles. The inappropriateness of the usual I.Q. tests for these social and economic groups is now generally accepted. The Ford Foundation sponsored a great variety of efforts in the area of curriculum revision for the hitherto educationally deprived. Preschool therapeutic-curriculum-programs for the disadvantaged are now being developed. Special training for teachers in deprived areas are being instituted, and a variety of pre-service and in-service programs have been devised, notably here, at the Graduate School of Education at Yeshiva University, but also Hunter, Newark State College, and elsewhere. Educational aids are being employed to improve communication with alienated low income parents. A special homework program for low income youth is being tried out by Mobilization for Youth. Perhaps most important of all, there is a spreading ethos throughout the country to the effect that low income youngsters are indeed educable; that it is the school's responsibility to educate them, rather than blaming the parents for the supposed lack of motivation of these children. Educating the poor is now seen as important for the future of our country, and is being rewarded by the power structure of the school system, the government, the press and of society at large. I believe that this "power variable" is the single, most important factor producing the specific changes in teacher behavior and in academic performance that are beginning to take place. By the "power variable" I mean the fact that this is now becoming "a prescribed thing to do." I've visited a great number of Boards of Education throughout the United States and I am tremendously impressed with the fact that the power forces in

many cities are strongly behind the efforts for improved education of the deprived.

It would be surprising indeed if, in the context of past discrimination, patronization and ignoring of the poor, a new positive trend were to arise entirely uncontaminated by the past negative history of the issue. Hence, there are a great variety of potential regressions as well as new dangers to be guarded against: (1) The danger of over-emphasizing vocational, non-academic education for children of low income backgrounds because of their physical style. The intellectually relevant aspects of the physical style are ignored and misunderstood in this approach. And the physical style is seen simply as preparatory for physical occupations; (2) The danger of aiming for no more than bringing disadvantaged youngsters up to grade level as though this was some lofty aim. Overlooked here is the positive style and creative potential of the low income child; (3) The danger of over-stressing the differences and the weaknesses in the background of the lower income child. If the differences were seen in the context of all of the strengths of lower class approach and style, then a full scale attack on the weaknesses, such as lack of school know-how, lack of test-taking ability and the like would be beneficial. But divorced from this framework, there is a strong likelihood that the low income youngster may develop a negative self-image because of the constant accent on his deficiencies; (4) The danger of over-emphasizing pre-school preparation for low income children on the assumption that we have to get to them as early as possible, carries with it the implication that not much more than remedial work can be done with these youngsters in the school proper. It is another way for the school to shirk its responsibility. Instead of passing the blame for low achievement on to the parents (as was once the fashion), the nursery and kindergarten have become the new dumping ground. Please don't mis-

understand me. I'm not in any way arguing against concern for pre-school education. I'm more concerned with the new excuses that some have found; (5) The danger involved in proposals for new separate tracks, for the previously segregated and deprived Negro children. It is argued that they will be damaged by the demands of the integrated classroom and the place of the middle class white pupils. Unspoken, or less frequently mentioned, is the fear that the disadvantaged child will retard the middle class child. Again, this view is rooted in the one sided stress on the deficiencies of the low income child and the unwillingness of the school to adapt to styles and needs of non-middle class children; (6) The danger involved in stressing one way communication from the school to the parents of the disadvantaged without stimulating parents to encourage their children to have a more interested, less estranged orientation towards the school. Actually, I believe it is only through two way communication that the parent can genuinely influence the school. It is only changing the usual character of PTA mmetings that the alienation and the estrangement will be broken down; (7) The danger involved in searching for gimmicks, cure-all techniques for teaching low income youngsters, rather than focusing our teacher attitudes on the imparting of knowledge and on the cultures and styles of low income groups. New techniques can be very useful, of course, especially in aiming towards far-reaching intellectual growth in low income pupils. However, by themselves, techniques and gimmicks will probably have limited effectiveness and can easily serve to obscure serious issues. In this connection, it should be noted that the mechanical application of role playing, without awareness of why and how readily degenerates into just another gimmick whereas it might otherwise be a most useful approach.

Current practices indicate that role playing is either used in an unskilled out-of-tune manner or, more frequently, is totally ignored in teaching low income children and in preparatory teacher training; (8) The danger in relying upon team-teaching devices and teaching machines. I was very impressed, not long ago, by an article in Life in which a team-teaching approach was presented for the teaching of Russian History in High School. The thing that struck me about this is that they had planned special groups for slow children, fast children, etc. Now, the slow children were assigned the topic "Russian Cooking" as part of their projects. The faster children were given much more intellectually relevant tasks. In other words, although team-teaching was used, a watered-down program for the supposedly slow children was still followed. As far as teaching machines are concerned, I had earlier advocated investigations of teaching machines and of program learning in work with low income youngsters. I did this on the grounds that the full approach was physicalistic in character, that there were clear-cut structural reinforcements, that it was a game-like technique, etc. I must tell you that my more recent informal experience in different parts of the country, is that this "just ain't so." What happens when you try the techniques with these youngsters is that at first they say "Oh, this is an interesting game"; "it's going to be fun," "You get the answers right away." Later on they say "I've been taken; this is just another reader," and a reading style is not the best style in which to break through to the low income youngster. I report this to you as an impression independently gathered by a number of people around the country.

Another danger to avoid very clearly is the emphasis currently given to what I call "exposure." There is a widespread notion that if you offer courses in which the teachers go out and see the homes and the neighborhoods of disadvantaged children, that this simple"exposure" will necessarily result in more

positive attitudes and beliefs on the part of teachers. I do not think that this is true. I think that it is quite possible for people to be exposed to the low income group and to come away with all of the biased perceptions that they initially had: The crowded housing, the difficult environment, the noise, etc. In order for teachers to see other things, you need much more time with the teacher, preparing him with respect to what to look for, how to look, how to relate to this child, etc. I would like to report that at Mobilization for Youth, at the present time, we are attempting very carefully to prepare our teachers, before sending them out into the community, in terms of how to understand the positives in the culture that they are going to look at. Finally, there is one last danger which I would like to mention and this is probably the most serious one of all at the moment. There is a danger that interest in the poor might become a fad and thus fade. I am quite troubled about this. I am tremendously impressed with the unbelievable momentum with which interest in the poor is now progressing. As Dean Fishman indicated before, I've written about low income culture for many years and have published dozens of articles on this topic. Hardly anyone was terribly interested in these articles, besides a very small group, many of whom are here on the platform today. However, in the past year or two, a tremendous interest has developed, and a great many people who were not previously interested in this problem at all have jumped on the band wagon. I don't mind their being on the band wagon; I am only concerned about their jumping off when some other issue becomes all the rage. This is a problem that we must all be alert to. I'm very much struck by the fact that role playing, which I thought was being used a good deal in the school situation, has not actually been used very much. The reason I originally thought it was being used so much, is that several people had written me about it and about how

effective it was with lower income youngsters. Apparently this applied to a very small and selective group of people. I also was impressed with the PHD theses at Columbia Teachers College on role playing in the field of education. I thought these ideas had become absorbed. More recently, I have become convinced that they have not become absorbed. Very few individuals have developed any sophistication regarding the technique or its power with low income youngsters. I submit that this technique is an extremely useful one for developing verbalization, which is a key thing in the academic development of the lower income youngster. I do believe they can verbalize very well in a role playing situation. However, I also think there is a good deal of need for research in connection with role playing techniques. It's very hard to get evidence about the nature of a style, speech pattern, behavior pattern of low income youngsters outside of the usual test structures. I know that Martin Deutsch has developed many fascinating new tests for attempting to get at some of the style. The "clown technique," for example, is a fascinating technique in this direction. However, we need additional research tools for recording and characterizing the nature of the speech, the nature of the verbal interaction of the youngsters and other low income individuals. I think it is very important tc have participant observer research in low income cultures. I think there is a great need to look for very different kinds of approaches. There is also a great need to study the various BEACON-like training programs and the schools and neighborhoods to which they have been directed.

Let me close with an emphasis which really has been an underlying point for everything I've said from the beginning and that is: the great need for an understanding of the positive element in the culture of low income groups. This too can be debased into a slogan. I'm troubled about it. I'm troubled

about the way it has been picked up in many situations. What is needed here is a very careful designation of what we mean by "positives" and what these positives are. Finally, it is incumbent upon us to consider how to use these positives. This is a tremendous question that needs a great deal more examination than has currently been given it. I have only begun to scratch the surface and much more work is needed. I am extremely pleased that the Graduate School of Education, through Project Beacon and several others are now beginning to study these matters more carefully than it was possible to do previously.